Seven Megawatt Solar Project to be Built on MMWEC Campus

Taking advantage of a prime site for solar, MMWEC has announced plans to build a 7 megawatt solar photovoltaic project on MMWEC’s Ludlow campus.

The project will be built on a 30-acre section of MMWEC’s 420-acre property. After receiving responses to its request for proposals (RFP), MMWEC is working on a contract with EDF Renewables Distributed Solutions, Inc, as the project developer. EDF will install the ground-mounted solar panels and associated equipment. MMWEC intends to maximize the use of local subcontractors on the project. Construction is expected to start this summer, and the project is expected to come online by late 2021.

Using its unique statutory financing authority as a political subdivision of the Commonwealth, MMWEC plans to use a local financial institution to issue tax-exempt revenue bonds to finance the project. The project’s cost is estimated at $14.5 million.

The municipal utilities located in Boylston, Ipswich, Mansfield, Marblehead, Peabody and Wakefield are participating in the project.

The project will generate more than 13,400 megawatt hours per year, enough to power over 1,500 homes. It will displace nearly 11,537,400 pounds of carbon dioxide emissions from Massachusetts power plants per year, based on current ISO New England average emissions.

The project was developed in alignment with the state’s decarbonization goals. It also allows for municipal utilities that may not have ideal locations for projects within their own communities to add more solar to their power portfolios. MMWEC CEO Ronald C. DeCurzio said he’s pleased to be able to offer this project to MMWEC Members.

“MMWEC and its Members have been incorporating carbon-free resources for decades... We are pleased to be a part of the solution.”

-Ron DeCurzio, MMWEC CEO

Climate Bill Vetoed by Governor; Included MLP GHG Emissions Standards

MWEC and its Member municipal light plants (MLPs) will forge ahead with plans to increase carbon-free generation in their power portfolios, despite uncertainty surrounding climate legislation in the legislature.

The legislation, S.9, is currently awaiting action by the House and Senate. Governor Charlie Baker vetoed a bill with identical language in the prior legislative session, and added amendments to the refiled bill after it landed on his desk. The legislation sets, for the first time, a greenhouse gas emissions standards for MLPs.

The bill calls for MLP greenhouse gas emissions standards of a 50% reduction of 1990 emissions levels by 2030; a 75% reduction by 2040, and “net zero” emissions by 2050. The provision was developed with the cooperation of the state’s municipal utilities through the Municipal Electric Association of Massachusetts (MEAM), and has been in the works through various pieces of legislation for some two years. It recognizes the local control aspect of the public power business model, acknowledging that there is no one-size-fits-all approach for MLPs.

The bill’s original language requires Massachusetts to reach “net zero” emissions by 2050, including incremental emissions limits every five years. The governor’s amendments create a range of allowable emissions – at 48-50% reduction at 2030, and a 65-75% reduction at 2040. Governor Baker said the flexibility is needed to ensure success and to keep costs under control. He also took issue with building code provisions related to energy efficiency.

The original compromise climate bill came out of a legislative conference committee in early January, which first began considering it some six months earlier. While the House and Senate acted quickly to vote in favor of the bill, Governor Baker had less than 48 hours to act on it during that legislative session. Without the ability to amend the bill, Governor Baker vetoed it. Within days of the governor’s veto, Sen. Michael Barrett and Rep. Thomas Barrett, legislative leaders who were both part of the conference committee that developed the bill, refiled it in its entirety.

The bill, as amended by the governor, now sits before the legislature’s temporary Ways and Means Committee. The Senate will be first to act on it.\n
SolarWinds Hack Reinforces Importance of Cyber Security

Federal agencies and other organizations are on high alert after a recent major cybersecurity hack.

The hack involving information technology management company SolarWinds, affected the company’s software Orion network monitoring program, which is utilized by a number of government agencies and private corporations.

MMWEC and its Members do not use SolarWinds Orion software and were therefore unaffected by the hack. According to the Electricity Information Sharing and Analysis Center, there are no known direct compromises of the SolarWinds cyberattack within the electricity industry.

Records show that the initial breach involving suspected Russian hackers occurred in September 2019. It went undetected until SolarWinds was notified externally by FireEye, a cybersecurity company and a customer of SolarWinds, that their system had been compromised in December 2020. It is unknown how hackers were able to infiltrate the software system, but once the system had been accessed, hackers were able to install hacked code into real SolarWinds updates.

Customers who updated their software between March 2020 and June 2020 unknowingly downloaded the compromised code.

Up to 18,000 customers downloaded the update with the hacked code. Many of those compromised by the cyber-attack were local and federal offices such as the Department of Energy, Department of the State, National Institutes of Health, the Pentagon and Department of Homeland Security, putting the US at serious risk. Several private companies were also affected including Microsoft, and FireEye.

Investigations to determine all the information that was accessed are still ongoing. However, it is known that the hackers were able to access personal data such as user IDs and passwords, along with financial records and source codes. The US Cybersecurity and Infrastructure Security Agency has advised that all US government agencies must update to Orion’s latest version by the end of the year or take these systems offline to prevent further breaches.

New reports reveal that Malwarebytes Inc., a computer security company with no direct connection to SolarWinds software, had a number of its Microsoft cloud email accounts compromised by the same suspected hackers. This means the security breach extends far beyond what was originally projected.

MMWEC Director of Financial Reporting and Corporate Technology Carol Martucci said the SolarWinds breach reinforces the need for organizations to remain diligent with their cyber security measures.

“While protection against an attack of SolarWinds’ scale and sophistication cannot be absolutely assured, it highlights the importance of staying current with cybersecurity best practices to prevent cyber actors from perpetrating future attacks and transparency within public power regarding potential threats and compromises, which help all of us stay secure,” said Martucci.

Martucci recommended a number of actions utilities can implement to help protect their data. Backups should be made of data, system images, and configurations and the backups should be kept offline. Organizations should also utilize multifactor authentication, update and patch systems, and ensure security solutions are up-to-date. Additionally, the American Public Power Association (APPA) developed a step-by-step guide for public power utilities to design, implement, and mature cyber supply chain security programs, which is available for free on the APPA website. While unaffected by this major breach, MMWEC remains proactive in protecting against such threats.

MMWEC Residential Demand Management Program Expands Offerings, Participants

MMWEC’s innovative residential demand management program, Connected Homes, has expanded. Two additional municipal light plants (MLPs) are participating in the program, and thermostats are now able to be enrolled.

Connected Homes allows residential customers to better manage wifi-connected devices in their homes while reducing their carbon footprint.

Launched in April 2020, Connected Homes is offered through MMWEC’s residential energy conservation service, the Home Energy Loss Prevention Services (HELPs) program. In conjunction with the software platform Virtual Peaker, Connected Homes allows customers of participating MLPs to leverage the technology of smart appliances and devices into energy and cost savings for the light department and its customers.

Through participation in Connected Homes, customers agree to allow their light department to make brief, limited adjustments to their devices during times of peak electric demand, such as temporarily reducing the charging rate of an electric vehicle during peak hours. Customers are informed of possible adjustments in advance, and are given the option to opt out of each adjustment. Customers who participate are given a stipend or bill credit.

As the state moves toward increased electrification, the Connected Homes program allows residents to easily manage their home’s energy use, by adjusting the device’s energy usage remotely, or by setting an automatic schedule.

The program includes select smart/wifi-enabled home batteries, electric vehicle chargers, electric hot water heaters and mini-split controllers, and now, thermostats. Devices and incentive amounts may vary by MLP – check www.munihelps.org for details.

Beginning in January 2021, the light departments in Shrewsbury and Belmont joined the program. They join the municipal utilities in Groton, Holden, Holyoke, Ipswich, Mansfield, Marblehead, Princeton, South Hadley, Sterling, Wakefield and West Boylston in Connected Homes.
Mansfield Municipal Electric Department (MMED)’s Go REO (renewable energy option) program recently celebrated its one year anniversary.

Launched in January 2020, MMED’s GO REO program offers its customers the option to pay an additional fee on their electric bills to offset their carbon footprint. The program offers customized contribution levels, allowing customers to make their energy sources 20, 50, 80, or 100 percent comprised of renewable sources. Customers also have the option to direct a specific dollar amount on their electric bill towards renewable resources. In 2020, the average MMED customer contribution was to have 80 percent of their energy comprised of renewable sources.

“The purpose of Go REO is to give each customer a chance to increase their environmental stewardship,” said MMED General Manager Joe Sollecito. “This in turn will provide financial incentives for future renewable projects.”

Sollecito added that the first year of the program gave MMED a better understanding of its customers’ interest in taking advantage of renewable resources.

One hundred percent of the funds collected through the Go REO program go towards the purchase of renewable energy credits (RECs). RECs serve as proof of purchases of renewable energy sources. Each megawatt-hour of clean energy produced is allocated one REC. With its funds, MMWEC assisted MMED in purchasing 228 Massachusetts Class I RECs.

Go REO’s 2020 results have a substantial impact on the energy resource mix for MMED’s customers. The program resulted in more than 213,000 kilowatt hours of clean, renewable energy with a reduction of more than 140,000 pounds of carbon. This is equivalent to planting 281 trees and having them grow for 10 years. The hours also equate to offsetting more than 150,000 vehicle miles or taking more than 13 vehicles off the road.

Sollecito said is he pleased with the results of the first year of the Go REO program and hopes more customers choose to enroll this year.

“MMED plans to continue this program,” said Sollecito. “With continual education of the benefits of energy renewable resources, this program will grow and expand for years to come.”

In order to further inform MMWEC Members and their customers about energy efficiency topics, the MMWEC Homes Energy Loss Prevention Services (HELPs) Program website has added new content. To keep Members and customers up-to-date with the latest HELPs Program information, a “News” dropdown menu has been added to the HELPs website. The News menu contains three new pages where viewers can read the most recent HELPs-related press releases, view HELPs Program meeting notices, and access an archive of the HELPs and Green Opportunity (GO) and solar renewable energy credit (SREC) newsletters.

For those who have purchased or are considering purchasing an electric vehicle (EV), the HELPs website now has an “EV Resources” page, which is meant to be a one-stop shop for EV drivers. Whether the customer wants to learn more about the benefits of driving electric, the ins and outs of a scheduled charging program, the advantages of purchasing a pre-owned vehicle, or eligible rebates, the EV Resources page is a useful tool for both new and seasoned EV drivers. The page also contains links to EV organizations for current and prospective EV drivers to expand their knowledge or search for vehicles, such as the Green Energy Consumers Alliance, which has an online portal of new and pre-owned EVs for purchase.

The tax incentives webpage on the HELPs website, accessed under the “Energy Saving Resources” dropdown menu, has been expanded to include information on EVs. Drivers can visit this page before they purchase an EV to learn which models are eligible for state and federal incentives. There is also a guide that walks recent EV buyers through the submission process for different EV tax credits. The site also includes information for business owners to learn about grant options for installing EV charging stations, and information on the grants available for public entities to use towards the purchase of EVs for their fleets or EV charging stations.

As clean energy treads evolve, MMWEC will continue to update its websites to keep its Members and customers up-to-date.
Wakefield Light Department Joins Commercial & Industrial Energy Efficiency Program

The Wakefield Municipal Gas and Light Department has joined MMWEC’s energy efficiency program for commercial and industrial (C&I) customers, known as the Green Opportunity (GO) Program.

Wakefield joins the light departments in Ashburnham, Chicopee, Holden, Ipswich, Peabody, Shrewsbury, South Hadley, Sterling and West Boylston, already in the GO Program.

The GO Program offers comprehensive energy audits and incentives and rebates for the installation of energy efficient equipment. This includes lighting retrofits, HVAC and more. GO offers incentives through both its prescriptive program and its custom program. Under the Custom Retrofit program, MMWEC staff work with customers and their contractors to define work scopes for the recommended projects, including a cost-effectiveness evaluation based on estimated annual energy savings. Customers and/or their contractors can propose their own projects, or customers can simply be interested in general energy efficiency programs to participate.

GO Program offerings can be a win-win for both the customer and the light department. Both the customer and the light department can see savings on their bottom lines when energy efficiency projects are installed. When the light department saves money, their customers benefit, through lower rates and investments in the community.

Peter Dion, WMGLD General Manager, said they are excited to be part of the program.

“We expanded residential energy efficiency offerings last year, and wanted to go into commercial offerings this year,” Dion said. “We see the great value in having effective energy conservation programs to marry with cost effective power supply management.”

Joe Coles, MMWEC’s Energy Efficiency Program Manager, said commercial and industrial energy efficiency will play an important role in the state’s efforts to reduce carbon emissions going forward.

“With energy efficiency as a top priority and a main strategic focus, MMWEC and its Members are committed to offering innovative carbon-reducing energy efficiency programs to their customers,” Coles said. “We look forward to working with WMGLD and their C&I customers.”

MMWEC Now Offering Language Translations on All Public Websites

In an effort to increase the accessibility of MMWEC’s energy efficiency information, MMWEC has added Google Translate to all of its websites. These include MMWEC’s main public website (mmwec.org), the Home Energy Loss Prevention Services (HELPS) site (munihelps.org), the Green Opportunity (GO) site, (mmwecgoprogram.org) and the Berkshire Wind Power Project site (berkshirewindcoop.org). Adding the Google Translate tool is just one step of many MMWEC and its Members are taking to reach hard-to-reach populations, including Environmental Justice communities.

In Massachusetts, a neighborhood is classified as an Environmental Justice community if it contains a block group whose annual median household income is equal to or less than 65 percent of the statewide median, 25 percent or more of the residents identify as a race other than white, or 25 percent or more of households have no one over the age of 14 who speaks English only or very well.

The new Google Translate tool allows the MMWEC websites to be viewed in several different languages including: English, French, Dutch, German, Italian, Polish, Portuguese, Russian, Spanish, Arabic, Greek, Chinese (traditional), Chinese (simplified), Hindi, Telugu, and Tamil. The languages offered are based on the country’s most common languages as well as the languages most often spoken in the MMWEC Member towns that have Environmental Justice populations.

If a non-English speaking person has his or her computer or device set to one of these languages and visits one of MMWEC’s websites, the site will be automatically translated. Otherwise, the websites can be translated via a dropdown language menu at the top of the screen on each website. MMWEC is currently exploring additional ways it can reach its Environmental Justice communities in Member towns.

MMWEC employees donated boots to the Community Survival Center in Indian Orchard as part of the annual boat drive.